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Bridging Learners and Clients: Challenges and Strategies

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Instructional Design
Teaching Effectiveness

As discussed in my previous post, "[Clients as an Instructional Resource](#)," integrating clients into the curriculum is promising and potentially innovative. A client-based course emphasizes a pedagogical orientation to gain real-world experience through meeting the "expressed needs" from the outside of the classroom. Students create impactful work, collaborate with clients, and sense professional culture. During the past several months, by collaborating with other faculty members, I had opportunities to implement some of these ideas in two graduate courses: Marketing Communication Planning and Instructional Design Capstone. The results, based on students' feedback, are positive and well demonstrate its pedagogical values as illustrated below.

"I absolutely loved having the opportunity to work with a real client."

"Allowed me to see how much I've learned over the course of the program and apply it to a real life organization."

"The hands on experience helped make me feel confident to apply to marketing positions."

Concepts, rationales, and benefits related to client-based curriculum have been explored in the previous post. In this post, I would like to discuss three major challenges I experienced or observed during the implementation as well as to propose potential strategies to cope with these challenges:

Challenge 1: Matching, matching, make me a match

The first challenge using the approach is to identify appropriate projects which meet both students' and clients' interests, and are also aligned with subject matters. A client-based pedagogy typically starts with letting students choose a relevant task. However, students often don't have sufficient knowledge and experience to choose and/or define a project with a balance between breadth and depth. An ideal project should have the appropriate level of complexity in the given context, allow the application of relevant theory and discipline-based knowledge, and focus on the issues of strategic importance to the clients (instead of simply technical nature) (Schwering, 2015). It is crucial to come up with projects that not only address clients' needs, but also allow students to apply knowledge and skills, and are achievable within time and logistic constraints (Sprague & HU, 2015). For long-term partnerships, it is important to identify and provide guidance to students who can add values to clients' work.

Challenge 2: Reduce the logistics burden for participants

The client-based project is often seen as overwhelming and too big to manage. In order to complete a project, students need to carry a series of complex activities by understanding clients' needs and context, identifying driving questions, locating relevant information, designing valid solutions, operating instruments, creating documents, etc. Students are expected to work toward intended goals. However, students are not experts and do not have sufficient knowledge and specific skills to perform in a fashion as experts would do for their projects. Students can easily leave the right track as

intended and pursue peripheral questions. In order to make client-based projects more manageable and less overwhelming, dividing the project across the multiple semesters might be a solution (Ewing & Dover, 2012).

The challenge is also for instructors. Waldner and Hunter (2008) pointed out that this approach requires instructors to spend additional time to find clients and to arrange logistics. Unresponsive clients could be a particular challenge because that interrupts the instructional process. Furthermore, no infrastructures or reward systems from administration make such involvement less desirable (Shea & Weiss, 2013). Therefore, how to help instructors manage the client-based curriculum and to recognize their efforts and time spending is worth exploration.

Challenge 3: Increase client's agency

Often times, course projects could result in a perception that the client and its workplace is a laboratory for students and demanding already scared management resources of clients (Shea & Weiss, 2013). As Schultz (2013) mentioned, those client-based projects serve the needs of the school or of the students more than those of the clients. As a result, it creates less of an incentive for clients or organizations to get involved because no value is perceived. In the long term, it reduces clients' interest participating in such community and university partnership. How to increase benefits to clients is one of course design considerations. For example, research indicates that client needs and interests can be better meet if clients are more involved in the planning and implementation process (Sprague & HU, 2015).

In sum, to make client-based curriculum effective, the challenges associated with it should be considered and design features should be clarified. Such challenges vary with the subject matter, students, clients, and project formats. Meltzer (2013) suggested several ways to make client-based curriculum solid in a policy analysis curriculum, including a solid combination of theory, application, context, and both team and individual client-based work. Relationship building is important in client-based curriculum. Harman (2009) proposed five partnering strategies: a. identify meaningful connections; b. demonstrate professionalism and preparedness; c. increasing clients' ownership; d. reviewing drafts with clients together; e. focusing on significant areas to clients. Lastly, to cope with the complexity of client-based curriculum is also worth consideration. For example, Chen (2011) discussed a project-based learning management system to reduce the complexity challenges. Above-mentioned strategies are worth considerations when you implement client-based curriculum. What challenges do you perceive? Or what suggestions do you have to make client-based curriculum more valuable? Please share with us.

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About the Author

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